



Experience in a New Key

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Experience, Its Edges, and Beyond

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Abstract: This essay offers a reflection on the notion of experience considered within the context of framework of relational ontology. The primary advantage of such a consideration is that it escapes the consequences of subject-object accounts of experience, accounts which either laud the cognitive subject as master of the experienced world or exile it to an existence in a world it does not experience as its own. Setting experience within a relational ontology and developing a participatory epistemology around the concept offers an inter-active account of experience as an ontological process and an integrated account of knowing and being. This ends the traditional privileging the human as a cognitive subject and opens the way to thinking of all elements within interactive processes as interpretive agencies. Furthermore, it allows the category of interpretation to be freed from the domain of cognitive subjects and to become a descriptor of ontological interaction in general.

Keywords: Consciousness, Experience, *Erfahrung*, *Erlebnis*, Hermeneutics, Interpretation, Subject-multiplicities, Language, Relational Ontology, Participatory Epistemology

1 Introduction

This essay offers a reflection on the notion of experience considered within the framework of relational ontology. The primary advantage of such a consideration is that it escapes the consequences of subject-object accounts of experience, accounts which either laud the cognitive subject as master of the experienced world or exile it to an existence in a world it does not experience as its own setting experience within a relational ontology and developing a participatory epistemology around the concept offers an inter-active account of experience as an ontological process is advantageous for two reasons. Considering experience as a mode of ontological inter-action offers of an integrated account of knowing and being. This suggests the end of the traditional privileging the human as a cognitive subject and opens the way to thinking of all elements within interactive processes as interpretive agencies. Inter-active being is intelligent being. Our argument contends that to arrive at a plausible account of experience involves re-thinking the concept as indicative of a participatory ontological process. Rather than isolating a knowing subject from the alleged objects of its experience, the notion integrates a subject or hermeneutical agency as a participant in the actual world of inter-active interpretive processes. It is this notion of experience as a participatory process and the consequences of thinking of experience in this way that this essay will consider.

The very notion of a participatory experience puts received notions of the concept of experience under a degree of philosophical pressure. In ordinary parlance, when we speak of an intense experience, we appear to invoke something that is well delineated: a powerful musical experience or an extraordinary dramatic performance. Distinctness and high-definition seem to be the hallmarks of such outstanding occasions. Yet, aspects of the concept actually incline towards something more obscure. If experience is a temporal process, from where does it unfold and, given the infinity of time, can it be meaningfully concluded?

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Philosophical hermeneutics points towards a notion of experience which is much more indefinite: instead of regarding experiences as objects given over to the analytical probings of consciousness, consciousness itself emerges as a consequence of experiential processes which precede reflection. This is summed up in the dictum “*Bewusstsein ist mehr Sein als Wissen*”.¹ The implication is that what is “experienced” has both its beginnings and possible ends in what exceeds consciousness. Furthermore, it implies that experience concerns processes that transcend the command of the cognitive subject. This frames experience as a hermeneutical problem *par excellence*: intense experience is compelling because despite its directness, it is neither clear as to where it is coming from, nor to where it is directing us to; it demands interpretation; it requires further involvement. *Experience emerges as a participatory process which because it transcends us is something we can never be finished with.* To elucidate such a notion of experience requires a participatory epistemology able to articulate experience as a conscious reflection of ontological processes which though they manifest themselves in consciousness nevertheless transcend its grasp.

2 New thinking, old problems

The challenge of thinking about experience in a new fashion is that our very means of thinking about it is dominated by what Nietzsche termed as the metaphysics of grammar.² Even posing the question springs certain traps. Why do we suppose that thinking about experience is different from or not part of experience itself? This essay presents experience as an ontological process, something dynamical, particular and far reaching. Experience is not a fixed entity with determinate analysable properties but a process which is both fluid and potentially transformative. As an ontological event, its spontaneous immediacy and seeming completeness are obvious and yet, there is no more mediate process so profoundly structured by language, history and culture. This reveals the transcendent dimension of experience. The ontological suggestion is that what emerges within individual linguistic consciousness as ‘experience’ is grounded not in the cognitive subject but within what transcends it i.e. in language-being (*Sprachlichkeit*), that is, within the world of intelligence (*Geist*)³ whose processes of historical and social inter-play though manifest in each subject-agency extend far beyond their cognitive grasp. Nietzsche comments, “Everything of which we become conscious is arranged, simplified, schematised, interpreted through and through - the actual process of inner perception, the causal connection between thoughts, feelings, desires, between subject and object are absolutely hidden from us.”⁴ This implies that whatever is termed as experience is not something given to consciousness as an object for its reflection but rather that conflicted consciousness itself manifests the tensions in the competing processes which give rise to it.

One of the significant achievements of philosophical hermeneutics is that it opens the path towards an ontological of experience as a participatory process. Gadamer’s pivotal distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* sets the philosophical conditions for this emergence though it does not itself achieve it. What is missing is a third conception of experience capable of uniting the previous two, namely, a specifically hermeneutic conception of experience as movement, of experience as transformative movement within the being of understanding ontologically conceived. Gadamer’s notion of *Sprachlichkeit* suggests a move of philosophical genius which in this context dissolves the customary epistemological binary of ‘subject’ and ‘object’. Like Hegel’s notion of *Sein* and Heidegger’s conception of *Dasein*, Gadamer’s concept of *Sprachlichkeit* asserts the primacy of language-being over linguistic consciousness. This upholds a dialectical unity of differentiation between the latter. Language-being cannot manifest itself other than through what it is not i.e. individual linguistic consciousness and yet, at the same time, what is not reducible to linguistic consciousness manifests itself through the movements of individual linguistic consciousness. This provides the philosophical framework for a specifically hermeneutic conception of individual experience: i.e. an

¹ Gadamer, “Autobiographical Reflections,” 24-25.

² Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 169-170.

³ ‘Intelligence’ is my preferred translation of *Geist*. It avoids the notion of *Geist* as a singular subject and emphasises its collective dimensions. The world of *Geist* is the socially interactive and intelligent world of art, design and scientific discourse.

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, section 477.

experience of that which both grounds an individual experience and yet reaches beyond it. This, we argue, is made manifest in the hermeneutical experience of ‘movement’ which we suggest entails a subject-agency coming to the awareness that it has undergone a significant change in its perspective or world-orientation. The need for such a hermeneutic conception of experience is suggested by the philosophical short comings of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. What is missing from the latter, surprisingly, is a specifically hermeneutical sense of movement, a sense which is integral to our attempt to re-think the notion of experience and what it has to say. What is needed is a conception of experience which allows us, to use Robert Pippin’s phrase, to engage with the world that is already at work within us. This suggests that hermeneutic experience is not so much *of* the world as if we were distanced from it but returns us to it as engaged participants.

3 Triangulated thinking

This essay brings together the arguments of three thinkers: the philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the hermeneutician and philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and the theologian Rowan Williams.⁵ Such an assemblage of different intellectual orientations may seem unlikely but each thinker complements the other in that all three begin to anticipate in different ways important aspects of process ontology and the participatory epistemology that must accompany it. Nietzsche prioritises the category of interpretation as a mode of inter-active engagement and what is more demands that such inter-actions be thought of not as the mechanical actions and reactions of un-intelligent bodies but as the interventions of intelligent processes. His denial of the subject-object relationship opens the door to thinking about interpretive experience as engaged inter-action in its own right. Rowan Williams’s notion of “intelligent matter” develops Nietzsche’s notion of “subjectless” interpretation towards a more cogent participatory epistemology. This he can do because he can take advantage of an ontological concept of language which derives from Gadamer and use it to reach beyond Gadamer in significant ways. All three thinkers are committed to a variant of the hermeneutical axiom X always equals $X+$ which in the context of this essay amounts to the claim that ‘hermeneutical’ experience always reaches beyond itself. Nietzsche insists that conscious experience is a reflection of inter-actions that transcend consciousness itself. In analogous fashion, Gadamer also knows that any aspect of an individual linguistic consciousness both reflects and can mediate the language-world which both precedes and succeeds it. Williams perceives the constant realignment and new creation of meaning in language-being as indicative of the creative-interactions of intelligent being as a whole.⁶ Each of these thinkers pose the same question but with subtle changes of nuance. How do we think of experience as an ontological event? An answer depends whether the concept of experience can be severed from its customary ground in the cognitive subject.

4 *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*

There is no doubt that philosophical hermeneutics made significant moves towards developing an ontological notion of experience as hermeneutical movement. This is made plain in Gadamer’s critical juxtaposition of the two German concepts for experience - *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* - and yet, as we shall see, the argument does not quite achieve the sense of experience as *hermeneutical* movement we are attempting to articulate. Let us first consider how the contrast between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* opens the question of

⁵ The work of Williams that most concerns us in this essay is *The Edge of Words*.

⁶ It is clear that Rowan William’s thinking here is heavily influenced by his broad theological commitments. Though he stops short of suggesting that the totality of creative interactions that constitute existence human and non-human is divine Being, the suggestion is consistent with his view of view of language as a universal material practice. Theological arguments often throw light on philosophical concepts. Given that the notion of experience under discussion is what Wolfgang Iser calls an ‘immeasurable’, experience demands a multi-cognitive approach to evoke its living complexity. Bringing the contrasting perspectives of Williams, Gadamer and Nietzsche to bear on the notion of experience is hopefully revealing. For Iser on ‘immeasurables’ see Iser, *The Range of Interpretation*, 114-115.

experience as hermeneutical movement. The issue posed by these two categories concerns the cognitive content of hermeneutical experience.

Is the world objectively distinct from our modes of experiencing it or is the objectivity of the world constituted by a shared mode of mode of sentient and interactive being? The trajectory of this question outlines the methodological debate over the cognitive status of individual experience which characterises the unfolding of hermeneutics from Schleiermacher and Dilthey through to Vattimo and Iser. Dilthey's notion of "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) articulated a specific response to the charge that individual experience within the arts and humanities was, epistemologically speaking, irredeemably subjective. This was countered with the neo-Kantian notion that though the objects and circumstances of experience are variable, the forms of experience through which the objects of history and culture are given to us are not. To articulate *Erlebnis* demands a conceptual distinction not unusual within conventional empiricism which differentiates between the (primary) physical world of primary properties as the presumed basis of human experience and the (secondary) re-presentations or reconstructions of that world in an epistemic subject's consciousness. This fateful distinction sustains the traditional epistemological demarcation between the "objective" world as it supposedly is in itself and the "subjective world" as constructed by individual preference and perspective. As Dilthey appreciated, the consequence of this distinction is to render the cultural world of meaning and value epistemologically inferior to that of the sciences. He attempted an escape from this epistemological *cul-de-sac* by locating individual experience within a shared structure of consciousness which, *pace* Husserl, he called the life-world (*Lebenswelt*). This concept supposes that objects within the cultural world are experienced within shared but variable categories of meaning and significance. These are not arbitrary. As forms of consciousness they possess a species objectivity analogous to those governing the experience of physical objects. The lifeworld is, accordingly, not a subjective projection, but a world in which meaning and significance are objectively encountered as phenomenologically real and shareable by those shaped by its mode of consciousness. Accordingly, the grounding of individual *Erlebnisse* within a collective *Lebenswelt* establishes the basis for the phenomenological study of literary and historical experience.⁷

Dilthey appreciated that the significance of an individual artist's intense experience of a given subject-matter very much depended upon the ability of the historical critic to move between the individual and particular distinctness of that *Erlebnis* and the cultural whole (*Lebenswelt*) in which it was situated and from which it gained both its form and significance. The notion of *Erlebnis* broadly understood implies for Gadamer a process of "taking part in" (*teilnehmen*), of being taken-up by and a "going along with" (*mitgehen*) something larger than ourselves i.e. the *Lebenswelt*. What concerns Gadamer, however, is that *Erlebnissen* are forgetful: emphasising the intense of individual qualities of experience *per se* suppresses consciousness of their sustaining *Lebenswelt* which their contextual meaning and significance depend on. The intensity of the aesthetic dimension of *Erlebnissen* takes precedence over their their cognitive content. This deprives them of objective status and condemns them to being incommunicable objects within an inarticulable solipsism. As Gadamer appreciated, it is not the properties of an intense individual experiential moment that is hermeneutically important but how that moment reflects and is related to the historical and cultural processes which underpin it, processes which the individual agent is not necessarily conscious of. *Gadamer proceeds to ontologize experience, to see it as an expression of ontological processes we partake in and not as an object solely contained within consciousness.* This more radical concept of experience is implicit but not fully developed in Gadamer's appeal to *Erfahrung*. Indeed, this ontological concept strongly suggests that the processes of experience have their being far beyond the constraints of individual consciousness: it is not we who have experience but rather it is we who emerge from and are taken up by the processes of experience. Once again, the Leitmotif "*Bewusstsein ist mehr Sein als Wissen*" is pertinent.

Whereas the aesthetics of *Erlebnisse* are related to a Faust-like fixation with singular transfixing moments (i.e. the Apollinian yearning for a beauty that suspends all sense of time), the concept of *Erfahrung*

⁷ For a fuller discussion of the conceptual entailments within the concepts *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* see Davey, "Lived Experience: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*."

concerns a profound sense of temporal unfolding, of journeying, of calling and vocation. *Erfahrungen* are not singular in the sense that *Erlebnisse* are but unfolding continuities which collectively disclose on-going processes of encounter, negotiation and engagement. Whereas I might speak of my experience (*Erlebnisse*) of Sophie van Otter singing Korngold's 'Marietta's Lied' as unsurpassably stunning and singular, I cannot speak of my experience (*Erfahrung*) of philosophy in the same way. The latter is forever changing and various and not always continuous. Hermeneutics for Gadamer is not a question of a cognitive subject appropriating a meaning but rather of a subject-agency being interrogated by a meaning, concern or subject-matter (*Sache*). *Erfahrungen* involve on-going encounters with sense-making structures exactly in that I might talk of my on-going experience of music and poetry. *Erfahrungen* imply a process of "taking part in" (*teilnehmen*), of being taken-up by and "going along with" (*mitgehen*) something larger than ourselves. In short, whereas Dilthey's notion of *Erlebnis* invokes *sameness* (to understand the work of an artist we must reconstruct and empathise with his *Erlebnisse*), Gadamer's concept of *Erfahrung* promotes *difference* as the basis of understanding: only when we are forced to recognise something different from the expected does the task of understanding commence. Accordingly it is not the sameness of the *Lebenswelt* that Gadamer emphasises but the continuities of difference within tradition since it is they that set the objective context of the processes which unfold within *Erfahrungen*.

Both the world of historical tradition and the broader world of *Sprachlichkeit* transcend individual consciousness. The practices we engage with and their direction of purpose are established well before we as individuals begin to consciously involve ourselves with them. However, it is only by participating with them that a sense of their possible origin and purpose can be discerned. *Erfahrungen* and their concerns are always on-going critical encounters and processes of review prompting a hermeneutic subject to think differently about itself. Gadamer comments: "Experience ... is never merely a confirmation of expectancies, but a surprise of them"; it "is initially always an experience of negation, something is not what we supposed it to be."⁸ *Erfahrungen* are part of a living dialectic in which retention, memory and expectation are brought into play. The challenge of *Erfahrungen* is that they bring to reflection the inadequacy previous beliefs, the limitations of present convictions as well as indicating the future possibility of re-configuring those beliefs differently. And yet, difference is not itself movement. The key question remains: what brings the recognition of difference to an experience of the hermeneutical?

5 The subject of experience

Gadamer consistently betrays his Hegelian heritage when he insists that understanding and the life of spirit (*Geist* - perhaps better understood as intelligence) consists in movement. It is clear that he associates *Erfahrungen* not just with the fact of historical change but with *undergoing* that change in the orientation of one's mode of being. A formal acquaintance with historical change does not involve an experience of hermeneutical movement whereas a loss of faith in religious or moral conviction or a transformative insight giving rise to a new way of seeing most certainly does. The fact of historical or ideational change remains merely academic unless it significantly disrupts our contemporary narrative and concerns. Indeed, as Nietzsche and Gadamer appreciate, the value of historical learning becomes a burden unless it can be shown how it genuinely informs our contemporary perspective. Without such a demonstration, Gadamer's hermeneutics collapses into what he would abhor; an account of historical learning that is purely theoretical and potentially alienating. The changes of historical difference can be recorded but unless they initiate a movement in our contemporary world-orientation, they do not constitute "hermeneutic" experience. This strengthens the participatory theme in our essay for, arguably, the 'hermeneutical' makes no sense without a direct appeal to experiential engagement with the subject-matters of hermeneutical concern. In other words, what makes hermeneutical experience "hermeneutical" is coming to the unexpected realisation that my position on matters of importance has been fundamentally altered. It is not that the "I" as a hermeneutical agent has decided to alter its religious or political affiliations. It is not the "I" that is effective

⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 356.

here but the networks of practical involvement in which and out of which the “I” or subject emerges. As Gadamer puts it, it is I who quite suddenly and contrary to my willing and doing find myself changed in my ethical or religious orientation. It is not, as Nietzsche suggests, the ‘I’ who is the *subject of* such movement’ but the ‘I’ that is *subject to* profound shifts in fields of orientation. Gadamer’s account of Aeschylus’s *pathei mathos* (learning through suffering) is instructive. It implies the emergence of a subjectivity that is the *consequence* colliding perspectives, of a subjectivity that gains awareness itself as an effect of the limitations, inadequacies and errors within its perspectives. Hermeneutical experience concerns, then, a profound sense of movement: a sense that quite unwittingly the evaluative and perspectival alignments that orient my being have profoundly altered. Such experience is “hermeneutical” because of the fact that in it an individual is brought to that realisation that it has been “moved on” because of the unfolding tensions and realignments within the practical commitments that constitute its being. Whether falling in or out of love, whether acquiring or losing a moral standpoint, such experiences can only be undergone by an engaged and embodied subjectivity. On this stands one of philosophical hermeneutics’ key claims: *subjective awareness only arises because of deep prior practical involvements (Dasein)*. Such reflective (hermeneutical) awareness is, indeed, a consequence of, if not an expression of, its preceding practical embeddedness which he or philosophies based around the notion of *Erlebnisse* tend to overlook.

In summary, hermeneutic experience as we have described it (i.e. the process of becoming aware of significant shifts in the alignments of world orientation that constitute one’s embodied being) depends upon the unfolding processes and involvement of an *Erfahrung*. What renders *Erfahrungen* hermeneutical are precisely those negative moments in a practice when a practitioner is forced to recognise the short-comings of their orientation and, more specifically, to acknowledge the degree to which he or she is implicated in the development of such short-comings. Ontologically speaking, hermeneutical experience emerges as the process in and through which an interactive intelligence realises that its has become different to itself.

This claim proposes a provocative reversal already implicit in the axiom *Bewusstsein ist mehr Sein als Wissen*. Philosophical and grammatical convention suggest that experience is anchored in the cognitive subject. The direction of our argument implies the reverse: hermeneutic consciousness is a representation and a consequence of ontological processes that reach beyond consciousness itself. In this respect, philosophical hermeneutics points beyond itself towards a participatory ontological concept of experience that it in fact supposes but does not articulate. Such an ontological concept of experience is anticipated with extraordinary prescience by Nietzsche who notably shifts the discussion of hermeneutic experience away from the cognitive subject towards a participatory hermeneutic ontology. In Nietzsche’s hands, hermeneutical experience becomes indicative of our ontological involvements.

6 *Erfahrungen* from an ontological perspective

When Nietzsche asks, “How could this nook perspective of consciousness permit us to assert anything of subject and object that touched reality?” he implies that reality is more complicated than any binary system can grasp.⁹ “Everything of which we become conscious is arranged, simplified, schematised, interpreted through and through - the actual process of inner perception, the causal connection between thoughts, feelings, desires, between subject and object are absolutely hidden from us.”¹⁰ “In summa: everything of which we become conscious is a terminal phenomenon, an end - and causes nothing.” Consciousness is an effect of interpretive processes, a coordination and *becoming-conscious* of impressions.¹¹ It is an effect of relations that are withheld from us.¹² The implication of such reasoning is not a phenomenalism that makes reality an unknowable thing-in-itself. Nietzsche was too much the philologist to abandon part-whole models of ontological thinking: whatever we do remains indicative of our mode of being and of being in general: “we do what we censure, dissatisfaction, this “away from actuality is precisely that character of existence - *we do*

⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, section 474.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 477.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 504.

¹² *Ibid.*, 524.

what we are¹³ As we shall see, the theologian Rowan Williams extends the argument in his claim that the exchanges of linguistic experience are also indicative of the processes that constitute our ontology. This link between our being and the character of our doing is explicitly critical of materialism. Nietzsche insists that there is “a perspective-setting force in “true being” - in school language: the subject, by virtue of which every centre of force - and not only man - construes all the rest of the world from its own view point.”¹⁴ This allows the category of interpretation to become a mode of ontological inter-action. By the latter Nietzsche does not intend to imply that an epistemological subject responds to and interprets an inert and senseless world of matter. He has profound doubts about the existence of a knowing ‘subject’. To use his formulations:

No subject ‘atoms.’ The sphere of a subject constantly growing or decreasing, the centre of the system constantly shifting.”¹⁵

The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary: perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? ... My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity ... The continual transitoriness and fleetingness of the subject.”¹⁶

The corollary of the denial of an independent subject is not the affirmation of the primacy of material process as for example is proposed in Marxist thought.¹⁷ To the contrary, *the denial of the cognitive subject must also entail a denial of matter as its objective correlative*. If it is argued that the realm of world-interpreting subjects is an embodied realm of interactive processes, interpretation is seemingly reduced to a material process. Consequently, it might seem that Nietzsche remains within that classic epistemological dualism which proposes that, on the one hand, there are conscious subjects and, on the other, there is inert unintelligent matter which resists the subject. However, he is only too well aware that as a species we have become ensnared in a web of our own making. Because we have found it useful to represent complex interactions in terms of objects, we make the false supposition that it must be material objects that are the cause of those representations. Nietzsche’s position clearly repudiates such a dualism: if the subject is denied, then, so is material reality. What then is left? A note of 1887 is suggestive.

“Thingness” was first created by us. The question is whether there could be many other ways of creating such an apparent world - and whether this creating, logicizing, abating, falsifying is not interest the best guaranteed reality; in short, whether that which “posits things” is not the sole reality; and whether the “effect of the external world upon us” is not also the result of active subjects. The other “entities” act on us: our adapted apparent world is an adoption and overpowering of their actions; a kind of defensive measure. *The subject alone is demonstrable; hypothesis that only subjects exist - that object is only a kind of effect produced by a subject upon a subject - a modus of the subject.*¹⁸

Nietzsche’s argumentation anticipates a provocative vision of the world as a multiplicity of different intelligent interacting processes or subject-centres. This has profound implications for how the category of experience might be understood. In the closing years of the nineteenth century he began to envisage an interactive hermeneutic ontology which physics and brain-science are now beginning to endorse, an ontology in which all ‘material’ interactions are grasped as interpretive exchanges. Not only does this question the traditional idea of matter as inert but it also questions the privileging of humanity as uniquely intelligent. Nietzsche’s attribution of ontological status to interpretation suggests that all processes are to a degree hermeneutical, that each party within an inter-action seeks to “interpret”, that is, to make

¹³ Ibid., 330.

¹⁴ Ibid., 636.

¹⁵ Ibid., 488.

¹⁶ Ibid., 490.

¹⁷ Marx argued in 1865 that “it is not consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social (material) being that determines their consciousness.” See: Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Preface.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, section 569.

sense of and assimilate its responses. This collapses the ontological dualism between mind and nature. The very properties we thought made us human (interpreting, sense-making, form finding) turn out to be attributes of the so called ‘material’ world as well: the world is like us after all, not because we are material beings but because the so called material world is made up of an unimaginable complexity of inter-active intelligent processes. This innovative approach to hermeneutic ontology suggest re-appraising *Erfahrung* as the ontological site of processural engagement. *Erfahrungen* are not pictures or mental representations of an extra-mental material world but representations (expressions) of on-going engagements with other subject-centres the totality of which is of infinite extent. This links with Gadamer’s argument that the “edges” of *Erfahrungen* are transcendent: they link to the being of other interpretive processes that reach far beyond them. As will be suggested in the coming sections, Rowan Williams’ approach to language extends Nietzsche’s intimation of the interpretative intelligence of ‘matter.’ This is made possible by the conceptual links between language, interpretation and ontology in their own positions and those that characterise signature patterns of reasoning in both Gadamer’s and Heidegger’s arguments.

7 Being “of” and “being of”

Gadamer’s axiom *Bewusstsein ist mehr Sein als Wissen* reaches back through Heidegger to Nietzsche in unexpected ways. The axiom suggests that what emerges in the linguistic consciousness of an interpreting agent is a reflection of the language-being (*Sprachlichkeit*) that both grounds and transcends it. For Nietzsche, what emerges in consciousness is conceived as a consequence of our participation in interpretive processes which reach beyond the range of our sensibility. This proposes a change in how *Erfahrungen* are to be conceptualised.

Two radically different ontological outlooks turn on the preposition ‘of.’ The phrase “conscious experience of the world” can entail representations of an extra-mental world. Here ‘of’ means ‘about’ or ‘concerning’ the world but not in Nietzsche’s case. What comes to mind as embodied representations are not of (ie. are not about or refer to) an otherwise independent world but are *of* the world in the sense of manifesting in consciousness the movement of those interactions which constitute and yet transcend our being. In this instance ‘of’ is genitive, suggesting a belonging-to or an emanating-from. *Erfahrungen* ‘are of’ (that is, exhibit) the inter-actions world rather being mental re-productions of an otherwise numinous reality.

Nietzsche and Gadamer seemingly agree that consciousness is a theatre of effects, a forum in which colliding and conflicting interpretations compete with one another. As ontological sense-seeking processes, *Erfahrungen* and their inter-connectivities reach beyond our cognitive awareness for two reasons. (1) What we understand ourselves as being could never be the ground of the processes that form us, rather, they are the effect of such processes. (2) The finitude of our understanding is not capable of grasping the complexity of the inter-actions from which we spring. Both points are integral to Gadamer’s conception of *Sprachlichkeit*: an individual’s linguistic consciousness is dependent upon the collectively shared language-being that transcends it. This does not render language-being a noumenal world. To the contrary, it is only the finite limitations of individual language-consciousness that prevents consciousness from grasping the full extent of the language-being that shapes it. What the ontological notion of *Erfahrung* opens up is the notion that as individuals we are always more than our finite consciousness can grasp. This does not mean that our extended hermeneutical being is incommensurable with or transcends any grasp. To the contrary, precisely because *Erfahrungen* are structured by the language world, they are subject to an infinity of interpretations. This has two implications. (1) Because the inter-connected process of experience transcend consciousness, they remain open. (2) This gives reflective consciousness scope to continually explore *Erfahrungen* and extend their possible entailments. It also explains why *Erfahrungen* are on-going.

The ontological notion of *Erfahrung* implies that we do not *have* experiences but *undergo* them. What unravels in experience is not a cognitive awareness of a given state of affairs but rather a process that is in Heideggerian terms “unterwegs”, a process that wells up within consciousness and then flows through the interpretive moderation of that consciousness’s responsiveness back to the networks of interaction from which it emerged. Experience therefore discloses an intelligent orientation to the world that is prior to cognitive

consciousness: experience stems from a prior knowing. Heidegger and Williams concur that we meet with a world of sense (*Dasein*) before being able to make sense of it. Nietzsche alludes to this when he speaks of consciousness as a discomforture of the organism, as a field of tension that comes to expression within in it and demands that as a subject-centre it organise its response.¹⁹ This ontologically prior world is not, as we have argued, a noumenal world alien from anything known. To the contrary, within this argument, consciousness emerges as a point of coordination amongst a multiplicity of intelligent sense-seeking processes which are operative prior to the emergence of reflective consciousness itself. Consciousness and its experiences become indicative of a subject-multiplicity organising itself as unitary being. Nietzsche knows that it would be a mistake to think of these modes of being as inanimate. What he describes as instincts are intelligent modes of world orientation in that they “know how to go on” in given situations.

It should be noted that as modes of world orientation, such pre-reflective instinctive experiences carry the marks of Heidegger’s account of the ‘to hand’ (*die Zuhandenheit*).²⁰ Though highly developed and trained, the mode of worldly orientation associated with *die Zuhandenheit* is one which “instinctively” knows the whereabouts of its tools and how to use them with the appropriate practical ‘know how.’ Practical experience pre-supposes an established untheorised mode of being-in-the-world (i.e. *Dasein*). The world of practical engagements is full of complexity: it is not in principle unintelligible but remains beyond the complete grasp of our finite intelligence.

The notion of *Erfahrungen* as indicative of our practical engagement with the world is not incongruent with Heidegger’s notion of “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*). Human existence consists of coming to find ourselves already placed within on-going social and cultural projects that both precede and succeed us. Human authenticity consists for Heidegger in surrendering to the direction of one’s practical commitments, following them through and realising their potential. For Heidegger potentiality has priority over being or, to put it another way, our being is the unfolding of inherited possibilities. This emphasises the processural nature of *Erfahrungen* the disclosure of as yet undisclosed possibilities for being within the nexus of inter-relations which constitute or existence.

It might be objected that Heidegger paints an over-simplified image of *Erfahrungen* as practical projects. First, if *Erfahrungen* are rooted in inter-active practical processes which antedate consciousness, neither the *alpha* nor *omega* of such projects will be clear which perhaps renders them to vulnerable to competing mythological and political appropriation. Second, the practical projects which circumscribe our existence are hugely complex, inter-related and sometimes contradictory. Our experiences and the projects they reflect do not commit us to a single destiny. Nietzsche’s notion of consciousness senses this. He recognises that consciousness is a conflicted space in which the different world-orientations which constitute our being collide. Gadamer too articulates a notion of troubled reflection: *pathei mathos* involves a practitioner coming to the realisation that he or she has inadvertently and unknowingly become subject to horizons of meaning which breach the aspirations of his or her practice. Indeed, Gadamer’s account of linguistic consciousness offers a persuasive philosophical account of the workings of ‘conflicted consciousness.’ As we have suggested, hermeneutical experience arises precisely at the point where the limitations of linguistic consciousness are exposed by the wider horizons of linguistic being. It is precisely because my individual linguistic being is grounded in language being in general, that the limitations of my initial grasp of meaning is susceptible to the alternative meanings which though held with language being are not clear to an individual language user. Nietzsche’s and Gadamer’s positions are congruous in that “conflicted consciousness” and “hermeneutical experience” (*pathei mathos*) are occasions when practitioners become aware that their operations are dependent upon transcendent processes which express themselves within language-being. An important philosophical question remains. What entitles us to think that conflicting experiences within an individual’s language consciousness are indicative of being in general?

It might be tempting to argue that the realm of world-interpreting or world-representing subject-agencies is nothing other than a embodied world of inter-active processes: the processes of interpretation and representation simply are material processes. This has the advantage from Nietzsche’s point of view of

¹⁹ Ibid., 440.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 114.

eliminating any notion of *Geist* as the cognitive subject of experience. The advantage has a striking corollary. If we take the view that speaking, interpreting and developing mental representations are material events in the world, are we not attributing to inanimate matter the very attributes that we once thought distinguished us as humans i.e. interpreting, sense-making, form-finding. This would suggest that the world is like us after all, namely, an ever-shifting realm of interpretive responses.²¹ We know that language-being is auto-genetic, a world of continually shifting indeterminate meanings independent of human intervention, a world where conflicting and contradictory meanings arise and fall away on their own accord. This implies that there is good reason to assume that the interpretive world of language applies not only to the realm of conscious subjects-agents but is also indicative of the realm of supposedly unintelligent material processes? Some caution is needed here.

Nietzsche is well aware that as language-agents we are guilty of imposing upon existence the distinction between intelligent subjects and inert objects; only because we have to believe in ourselves as ‘subjects do we believe in objects’. This suggests that we have become caught in a linguistic trap of our own making. Because we have found it useful to represent complex interactions in terms of objects, we make the false supposition that it must be material objects that are the cause of those representations. However, such caution is itself not unproblematic.

The subsequent prejudice that matter is inert and not a responsive form-giving force in its own right is coming increasingly being into question. Whereas Gadamer speaks of the openness of language, Nietzsche and Rowan Williams are inclined to think of what the Japanese sculptor and theorist Noguchi proposed as the primal “openness” of matter, an openness that frees it from the inert, allowing it to become open to possibilities within itself.²² This is not to suggest that the movements of the ‘material’ world are reducible to linguistic but it does allow the suggestion that the movements of language as a constructive, form seeking, sense-pursuing force offer a way of understanding the ever shifting process of the material world conceived as inter-active processes. Rowans Williams approaches such a position in his book *The Edge of Words*. In so far as language is a material process in an of this world, he argues that,

Only the fact of language provides the models we need to grasp the processes in the non-human world. So far from being by definition mindless, it seems we have no choice but to talk about it as a linguistic or symbolic reality, whose processes we can only understand by analogy without own conscious systems of recognition and collaboration.²³

8 The language of being?

Like Nietzsche and Gadamer, Williams ontologizes the movements of language-being and presents them as a key to understanding the character of being. Whereas Gadamer is explicit in his commitment: “Being that can be understood is language”²⁴, Williams is more implicit: we have no choice but to talk about the non-human/material world as a linguistic or symbolic reality. He reasons that if the world is a singular dynamic totality, and if within that totality language is a living embodied process, it is not unreasonable to assume that so called material processes are also hermeneutical, constantly assessing the meaning and implications of alterations in their surrounding environments. As he observes, contemporary neurology and genetic coding suggest ever more strongly that any account of the “material” world must also include stories of negotiation, of systems “finding their way” whilst interacting with another systems, of inter-active networks constantly refining and elaborating their engagements rather than settling into an eternal equilibrium.²⁵ In this world picture, things cease to be inert and become subject-agencies which depending upon their individual complexity, seek solutions and innovative structures to respond to the challenges

²¹ Davey, “Hermeneutics and the Question of the Human: “And what if the world turns out to be like us after all?” A Cautionary tale for Hermeneutics”, 130-144.

²² Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*, Preface.

²³ Williams, *The Edge of Words, God and the Habits of Language*, 102.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 474.

²⁵ Williams, *The Edge of Words, God and the Habits of Language*, 102.

of other subject-agencies. The fact that language is embodied, prompts the suggestion that material existence is itself hermeneutical. Williams' position does not reduce Gadamer's category of *Sprachlichkeit* to the material. To contrary, by regarding material existence as systems of 'negotiation' interacting with one another, material existence is scaled up to become part of *Sprachlichkeit* as an extended ontological category. If we free ourselves from the notion that the material world is a realm of dumb things so that we can consider it a sum of inter-active processes, the material world emerges as something dynamic. Material processes can be considered as interpretive "agencies" metaphorically "seeking solutions" to the challenges of other subject-centres. William's proposal that the constant shifts of meaning and symbolic alignment within language are indicative of the inter-active nature of being itself lends support to the concept of experience we have been building. What then are the advantages and disadvantages of the inter-active notion of experience we are proposing?

9 Concluding reflection

The grammatical forms of human language are often regarded (even by Nietzsche) as a hindrance to grasping the nature of an actuality constituted by processes of constant change. However in their different ways Nietzsche, Gadamer and Williams all see in the motions of language the movement of the inter-actions world itself. Experience does not represent or picture actuality as something exterior to it but expresses or manifests it. Grasping experience as an interactive process and seeing such those processes as indicative of being as an inter-actions world, places all subject-agencies on the same ontological footing. The concept of an inter-actions world dissolves the distinction between the human and the non-human world. All being is inter-active, sense seeking and perspectival. A common environment of inter-dependent actions is supposed. Hermeneutic experience may emphasise "my perspective" but having that perspective implies that I am bound into and dependent on the perspectival being of others. The language of hermeneutic experience becomes by analogy the language of ontological exchange.

Hermeneutics considered as processes of interpretive response no longer appertains to the humanities alone. To the contrary, interpretation becomes an ontological category indicative of the form seeking responses of all subject-agencies participating in the same inter-actions world. Hermeneutic experience and its movements becomes the mode of being of such agencies. Hermeneutics as interpretive engagement emerges as interactive ontology. What Williams could have argued is that only the fact of hermeneutical language, specifically its account of interpretive experience, provides the models we need to grasp processes in the non-human world. Insofar as the latter involves interpretive i.e. "intelligent" responses, there is no need to limit the category of *Geist* to the human world. Re-thinking experience and its hermeneutic dimensions in this way extends the range of inter-active beings we might engage with in unimaginable ways.

Consistent with regarding the process of interpretive experience as indicative of a hermeneutic ontology is a secularist account of the transcendent. We have seen that hermeneutic experience, specifically its conflicted nature, is a reflection of the ontological fact that interpretive experience assumes the priority of language-being over linguistic consciousness. Linguistic consciousness is ontologically speaking utterly dependent on the language-being that transcends it. Nietzsche's schema of reasoning also identifies the dependence of interpretive action upon that which transcends it. Subject-multiplicities and their inter-actions constitute the ever changing processes of actuality. The "edge" of experience within in one subject-multiplicity folds into the experiential field of another. The inter-active nature of experience straightforwardly implies that individual experience is connected to and carries the imprint of what transcends it. Inter-active experience necessarily points to the actuality beyond itself. The fact of such experience demonstrates that the transcendent streams into us all the time. This has a clear ethical implication: inter-action demonstrates inter-dependence with the transcendent.

The struggle to represent, to interpret and to give form, is itself an expression of the inter-actions world. We are not isolated cognitive subjects lost in an alien unintelligible realm. To the contrary, as subject-multiplicities we are part of the very world whose effects are our experiences. This allows experience to be conceived of as fundamentally inter-active, engaged, interpretive response. It points, furthermore, to

an ontological hermeneutics that Gadamer's thinking concerning *Sprachlichkeit* formally anticipated but never articulated. The advantages of re-thinking experience *via* hermeneutics as an ontological process are clear but what of criticisms of our lead argument? The objections are worth considering since they require making good a claim made above; a relational ontology demands the a participatory epistemology.

Three difficulties face our account. (1) Relational ontology acknowledges that all interactions are undertaken from a specific point of view. If there is no being other than this inter-actions world, does not this concede that all 'knowledge' is perspectival and therefore, formally speaking, it is impossible to determine what truth is? (2) If the ontological conception of experience we have defended involves inter-relations that reach beyond consciousness, are we not granting that the extended content of experience is beyond our understanding? (3) The notion of *Erfahrungen* as indicative of on-going cultural projects suggests that we will never get to the bottom of them. Whereas our understanding is both limited and finite, the ontological entailments of our experiences are infinite in their potential effects. These three criticisms can be conceded. Yet, they depend on conventional notions of truth as a determinate cognisable object. If, however, a participatory epistemology is brought to bear on the relational ontology we have defended, the three negativities outlined cease to be hindrances to our position but offer hermeneutical portals for thinking about experience and 'truth' more constructively.

With regard to (1), perspectivism is a problem only if its traditional corollary of an independent extra-mental world is affirmed. The perspectival arguments put forward by Nietzsche, Gadamer and Williams are all opposed to the dualist notion of another world underlying interpretive engagement. For all three, being is interactive and hence perspectival. Indeed, each perspective may be thought of as a form of world building. Nor do such perspectives need to be thought of as mutually exclusive to each other as if they were self enclosed monads. All three positions suggest that perspectives are ontologically speaking open. In Nietzsche's case, an experiential perspective folds into the edges of those subject-multiplicities which effect it. Gadamer's language philosophy recognises that as different aspects of language-being, each and every language perspective is speculatively open to and connected to others. Indeed, it can be argued that within a relational ontology, perspectivism is fundamental to a participatory epistemology. Changing and multiplying perspectives permit a subject-multiplicity to experience itself not only differently but more completely. Hermeneutic experience opens a subject-multiplicity to becoming different to itself and therefore to changing its mode of relation with other subject-multiplicities.

That experience is ontologically limited to a perspectival framework is not a limitation to knowing. The fact of perspectival interaction actually sets the conditions for a subject-multiplicity coming to know more of itself. Consider the following. The experience of an embodied inter-active subject-multiplicity is necessarily multi-registered. Its complexity is such that reaching beyond the confines of reflective consciousness, it cannot be reduced to any one mode of interpretation. Though the experience of such a subject-multiplicity may reflect a distinct point of view, it cannot be reduced to a single perspective. The perspectival being of a subject-agency or a subject-multiplicity is not therefore subject to final description. *There is always more to a perspectival being than the perspective of that being can imagine.* This suggests that each subject-centre is both unfinished and unfinishable, constantly under pressure to open itself to what is other than itself. This offers a further perspective on Gadamer's proposition *Bewusstsein ist mehr Sein als Wissen*. Precisely because an experiential perspective is grounded in that which extends beyond it (i.e. other perspectival beings), those other ways of world building can offer ways of questioning and opening up unseen aspects of a subject-multiplicity's initial perspective. In other words, precisely because there is always more to the being of a subject-multiplicity than its singular perspective can imagine, an individual subject-multiplicity needs other subject-agencies and their perspectives to become more transparent to itself. Its constituting experiences are incomplete, on-going and contain unrealised dimensions. The potentials within a perspective are often better discerned from another way of seeing and thinking about experience. However, and this is the decisive point, possessing a perspectival outlook and experiencing the world in a distinctive way does not preclude a subject-centre from coming to know more of itself. To the contrary, within a participatory epistemology it is the condition of experiencing itself more fully.

Let us close this reflection on re-thinking experience with a final word on what can never be final, i.e. the question of truth. Contemporary hermeneutics operates with two notions of truth, the ontological

and the interpretive. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics never questions the *fact* of profound, life-changing, existential, aesthetic or moral experience. Irrespective of their content, such experiences are 'truly' undergone. However, as we have seen, profound experience is frequently, unresolved, ongoing and conflicted. A subject-centre needs to resolve the ambiguities within its experience as the coherence of its perspective - its mode of inter-acting with the world - can be called into question. Here the question of interpretive truth arises. In the context of our discussion of experience as an ontological process, "hermeneutic truth" does not concern questions of epistemological validity as if questions of experience can be settled once and for all. To contrary, hermeneutic truth concerns questions of integration. Williams makes the point in admirable fashion: "to be truthful is to try and find a way of speaking that does maximal justice to the diversity and plurality of a situation."²⁶ It is never a question of which competing perspective is true or false but a question of how and to what extent a challenging perspective or set of experiences can be integrated by a subject-centre so as to extend its scope of action and come thereby to understand itself more truthfully. That task, like (and, perhaps, because of the ever changing) edges of experience, remains forever open. Only thus can the 'truth' of experience be more fully discerned.

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